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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 000392

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SUBJECT: DAS DANIN AND KADIMA STRATEGIST DISCUSS MIDDLE EAST PEACE AND ISRAELI ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones; Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

1. (C) Summary: Political consultant Eyal Arad told NEA DAS Robert Danin and Ambassador Jones January 25 that Kadima is ready to fulfill Israel's roadmap obligations and commitments to the USG, including those pertaining to outposts and settlements. Arad maintained that Israel must maintain "security zones" in Palestinian areas to counter tactical threats and insisted that the Palestinian Authority (PA) disarm militias. Turning to Israeli politics, he outlined the reasons for Kadima and Alternate Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's strong polling numbers, explained how Likud might use the Hamas issue to regain lost ground, and targeted undecided Labor voters as an additional pool of potential Kadima voters. Comment: Arad is a paid consultant for Kadima. He previously worked for PM Ariel Sharon and is not an unbiased observer. End comment and summary.

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Kadima will remove illegal outposts  
and honor commitments on settlements  
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2. (C) Arad said that Olmert's speech to the Herzliya conference the previous evening had demonstrated that Kadima does not see the peace process as a zero-sum game and has a clear vision of the steps necessary to obtain peace. Olmert had told his audience that Israel's fate is interlocked with the Palestinians, saying "their welfare is our welfare, their well-being is our well-being, their stability is our stability." According to Arad, Olmert realizes that Israel will need to "give up" most of the West Bank (with the exception of the major settlement blocks).

3. (C) The Ambassador welcomed Olmert's public remarks about dismantling illegal outposts. Arad insisted that Kadima intends to fulfill Israel's roadmap obligations and commitments to the USG, regardless of whether or not the PA complies. Disengagement had been intended to lead to the roadmap or at least to "park" the process until the PA could fulfill its own commitments, he said. Arad claimed that many of the settlers are moderating their positions; a prominent settler activist had presented PM Sharon with a plan in which settlers in isolated communities would voluntarily move at government expense to Israel or one of the larger settlement blocks. DAS Danin and the Ambassador cautioned that the USG does not condone settlement activity and has always insisted that any territorial changes in the West Bank be agreed to with the Palestinians.

4. (C) When Arad spoke of Israel's requirement for "security zones," the Ambassador noted that security for a country with little strategic depth derives largely from good relations with its neighbors and international support. Arad listed three threats to Israel (long-range missiles, terrorism, and conventional attacks), arguing that security zones are important for countering tactical weapons such as Qassam rockets. He acknowledged, however, that countering the extremist threat requires a multifaceted approach including coordination with the PA and Palestinian society, international arrangements to isolate terrorists, and security arrangements on the ground. DAS Danin reiterated the USG's classification of Hamas as a terrorist organization.

5. (C) Arad complained that both sides feel "cheated" by Oslo. He questioned whether PA President Mahmud Abbas could live up to his rhetoric and disarm militias. Arad also politely criticized the USG's dealings with the PLO for failing to force the group to dismantle its terrorist infrastructure. DAS Danin explained how the first phase of the roadmap is intended to address such concerns.

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Kadima challenged by Likud, seeking votes from Labor  
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6. (C) According to Arad, Kadima had been able to sustain its lead in the polls because of its centrist and pragmatist policies, not as a result of sympathy for PM Sharon, whom 85 percent of Israelis do not see returning to politics. Sharon could have chosen to remain in Likud and move it to the center, said Arad, but once Likud bolted to the right (with Netanyahu) and Labor went to the left (with Peretz), the center was wide open for Kadima.

17. (C) When asked by DAS Danin where Kadima is focusing its campaign efforts, Arad replied that the largest target is undecided Labor voters. However, he listed Likud as the top threat to a Kadima victory, saying that Likud could benefit from a perception that the international community "created" the Hamas problem by forcing elections on the PA and Israel. He noted that Kadima's polls show an increase in concern about security -- the first real jump since the IDF deployed in the West Bank in April 2002. While Likud had previously been known for security and Labor had been known for peace, Arad maintained that "today Kadima owns both fields." He said polls had shown this to be true with Kadima under Sharon and "amazingly enough, (it is) also true for Olmert."

18. (C) Arad maintained that as potential government leaders, polling data showed that "Bibi (Netanyahu) is hated and Peretz is unappreciated," which leaves the field to Olmert. In Arad's estimation, sixty percent of former Likud voters would eventually defect to other parties because of their strong dislike for Netanyahu. Arad claimed that several factors had contributed to Olmert's high poll ratings: he moved into Sharon's job without party infighting; he quickly addressed tough decisions such as the outpost issue; the security services accepted his leadership; and he assumed the job with great sensitivity to Sharon and his family. Arad noted that Olmert's Herzliya speech -- including (back-handed) the praise for former finance minister Netanyahu -- was intended to show that Olmert is now "above the fray."

19. (U) This cable was cleared by DAS Danin.

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